Inkborn: The Ballad of Balpie

by Quilla Raye

I was a young man, like everyone my age. My head was perfectly round, a deep black orb with a smooth sheen that shimmered faintly when the rays streaked across the Flats. I lived in Another Universe—or so we called it, though to us, it was the only place that had ever existed.

There were whispers, faint echoes of an Other Place. A myth passed down like a smudge on paper, soft and nearly forgotten. They said it had color—real color—and temperatures, emotions even, that moved like water. But I knew I would never go there. The Flats were all I had known. A white canvas so wide and seamless that no penman could walk its edge in a lifetime. And yet, it felt small sometimes—tight, even—with the weight of repetition pressing against my plastic frame.

My name is Balpie.

Like the others, I lived on the Flat. That blank, eternal stretch of white where everything was born and forgotten. Sometimes it felt like nothing changed, like we were being held in a kind of permanent line—a straight command from something higher than us, something unseen. I didn't understand it, but I followed it, because that's what we did.

I had a mother and a father.

My mother's name was **Slud Ramlud**, a soft-glide gel pen with ink like velvet and a heart full of imagery. She painted our lives in bright swirls when I was young, letting my imagination drip from her stories. My father, **Ramlud Rowes**, was different—rigid, ballpoint, strict, sharp in stroke. He believed in form, in direction, in logic. And yet, when they crossed lines in love, I was born—a blend of them both.

They said I was a handsome penman. I had the body of a fine instrument, molded from resilient polymer—hard, straight, smooth—yet within me was a soft ink core that pulsed with thought and curiosity. I could draw lines sharp as rules, but inside I carried curves, dreams, bends I couldn't explain.

We lived near the edge of the **X**—a massive crossing of strokes etched into the Flats generations ago. It was said that the X appeared when the ancestors first arrived, a convergence of two mighty lines that bled through space and time. When the rays came—those light-streaks from the Other Universe—they touched the X, and color would sometimes seep through.

That color changed everything, even if only for moments.

My people—the Penmen—came from tribes older than ink itself. They told stories about the **Ether**, a force from beyond that sent the rays. The Ether governed the

flow of ink and the direction of thought. They said it made the lines straight or curved, depending on the will of something more—perhaps the One Who Draws.

But I questioned things early. Why only white? Why did we fear the edge, if none of us had ever seen it? Why did color arrive only in streaks, never in form?

One night, I sat by the edge of the X, the rays brushing against my silhouette. I watched the colors dance—violet, saffron, a whisper of green. They didn't last, but while they were there, I imagined myself bending, curling, bursting into shapes that no one had drawn before.

"What if the Other Place isn't a place at all?" I asked aloud. "What if it's a state of ink? A way of being?"

My father overheard me. "Don't say things like that, Balpie. That kind of thinking bleeds too far. The Ether may not erase you, but others might."

But I couldn't help it. Something inside me stirred—maybe it was my mother's softness, or the pressure of the rays—but I started drawing strange things when no one was watching. Loops, stars, faces. Dreams. They poured from me like I wasn't making them at all—I was simply a vessel.

One day, I awoke to find the white canvas beneath me rippling. Not visibly, but I could feel it, like a subtle vibration beneath my point. The X pulsed with warmth, and for the first time, a **volume** appeared.

Volumes are not supposed to happen in the Flat. Everything here is surface, line, gesture. But this… this rose. A colored form, three-dimensional and humming with light, emerged like a drop of ink that refused to flatten.

Others gathered. Some gasped. Some ran. My father stood stiff beside me, his cap trembling. My mother approached and touched it.

"This is you," she whispered.

I didn't know what she meant, but I felt it. The volume responded to me. As I moved, it moved. As I blinked, it shimmered. It was a reflection—not just of my thoughts, but of my choice to see beyond the Flat.

That night, I stood alone on the rim of the canvas. The rays returned, brighter than ever. They licked the sky with fire and memory. The X glowed, and from it, I saw more volumes begin to rise—faint, tentative.

The Others were changing. Or perhaps they always could, but were too afraid to draw their own lines.

For the first time, I felt the Ether not as authority, but as invitation.

I pressed my point against the blank white and drew a spiral. It grew, expanded, burst outward into color and motion.

Behind me, I heard a whisper from the old legends:
“He who draws with wonder will pierce the veil.”

Maybe the Other Universe wasn’t somewhere we reached.
Maybe it was something we *created*—from within.
Inkborn, not to follow, but to begin.